

Railroad Quiet Zone Study Summary/Standard Response – Updated: January 16, 2014

Greetings:

Thank you for your comments to City Council concerning train noise. We understand your concerns and have heard from a number of other residents on this issue.

The railroad tracks in Boulder are owned and operated by the BNSF Railway Company. The sounding of train horns at crossings is regulated by federal rules from the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA). We understand that train horn noise may have increased over the past decade, despite the number of trains passing through our community remaining fairly stable. This is due to federal rules, which were adopted in 2005, mandating a consistent pattern and decibel level of horn sounding at public at-grade crossings. Previously, locomotive engineers had more discretion as to when the train horn was sounded, and could, for example, choose not to sound the train horn at a given crossings at night if no hazards were present on the tracks. The federal rules now require that all trains sound horns between 96 and 110 decibels at all public crossings.

However, in the same 2005 rulemaking process, the FRA established a process by which road authorities can establish “quiet zones,” which remove the requirement for train operators to routinely sound their horns at crossings. Information concerning quiet zones is available at <http://www.fra.dot.gov/Page/P0104>.

The city is currently in the process of exploring quiet zones to address the community concerns regarding train horn noise. There are several elements to consider, including the type of crossing treatment that may be applicable for each crossing, pursuing a notification process or an application process with the FRA, safety issues, cost of improvements, and the need for cooperation among agencies.

City staff has also been following this issue for many years and working with the Regional Transportation District (RTD) and other partners to understand the processes, costs and infrastructure requirements for implementing quiet zones. RTD is planning to construct quiet zone improvements along much of the Northwest (NW) Rail corridor if it is built, which is currently estimated for 2030 or beyond. The city continues to work with RTD and the other agency partners to bring rail and its associated improvements to the corridor within a more reasonable timeline than currently proposed.

Additionally, RTD is conducting a study in 2013-14 to evaluate NW Rail options. The outcome of such a study would inform the future scale and scope of RTD’s commitment to quiet zone improvements in and near the City of Boulder.

The city understands that train horn noise associated with existing freight traffic along the BNSF corridor impacts the quality of life for residents in the area. While RTD’s transit studies are welcome, the train noise will persist regardless of the outcome of a regional transit plans.

Given this reality, the city has commissioned a Railroad Quiet Zone study to refine cost estimates for implementing quiet zones at the BNSF railroad crossings in and near the City of Boulder (this includes several crossings located in Boulder County). This work provides a clearer picture of the actual needs at individual railroad crossings as well as necessary potential education and enforcement programs and will allow us to work strategically with agency partners, including Boulder County, RTD, neighboring communities, and the Colorado Department of Transportation

to implement quiet zone improvements incrementally over time, if funding sources become available. (Currently, the city's Capital Improvement Program (CIP) doesn't include funding to implement quiet zones.)

Copies of the City of Boulder Railroad Quiet Zone Study reports and a list of frequently asked questions are available on line at:

<https://bouldercolorado.gov/transportation/transportation-projects-and-programs>

click on "Train Horn Noise and Quiet Zones."

I hope this explanation has been helpful. Please contact me at (303) 441-4155 or via email brackek@bouldercolorado.gov if you have further questions.

Sincerely,

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